

Social Work Education

A Fish Out of Water: A Seasoned Professor from a Small Private University Discusses her First Experience as a Teaching Assistant at a Large State University

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Abstract

The following article describes the teaching experience of a teaching assistant and PhD student at the University of XXX. The student is an associate professor at a small private college with no prior experience at a state university. The student teaches with a great breadth of latitude at the private college and does not have that same latitude in the role of a teaching assistant. She learns the meaning of the word ombud as well as other lessons from the chairs of the BSW and Doctoral programs. Additionally, she grows as an educator as she experiences more diversity in the classroom than she has in the past.

Keywords: ombud, teaching, university, assistant, professor, educator

Introduction

“Ombud. What’s an ombud?” I said to the director of the PhD program. He graciously explained the role of the academic ombud on campus. I vaguely remembered hearing something about this in teaching assistant training. However, I did not expect to have any contact with anyone from this office. I have been teaching for over 8 years at a small private university and can only remember one student complaint that even went to my chair and that incident was quickly resolved. There is no academic ombud on the private campus. I think back to any experiences I have had with this term and remember that one of my BSW students did her field experience at the Ombudsman Joint Office of Citizen Complaints in XXX. She was often an advocate for people, who were experiencing injustice. She attempted to resolve disputes and sought justice for the oppressed. What injustice could I have done to require the chair of the BSW program to contact the ombud? I definitely felt like a fish out of water.

The Office of the Ombudsman

The history of the modern use of the term ombudsman comes from Sweden, with the Swedish parliamentary Ombudsman’s Office instituted in 1809. Van Roosbroek and Van de Walle (2008) state, “Its task was to protect the rights of citizens against the executive branch” (p. 288). Additionally, they report ombudsmen “give recommendations that seek to alter laws, regulations, and/or organizational structures” (p.288). Universities and hospitals have recently adopted the notion of the ombudsman.

The ombudsman service seeks to mediate conflict with the hopes of finding a mutually acceptable resolution without the involvement of litigation (Alcover, 2009). When considering

the possibility of lawsuits and adjudication, it would seem that most organizations would consider ombudsman services a beneficial alternative. The role of the ombudsman, in and of itself, is a fascinating one. The possibility of helping someone with little power work through a conflict with a person in authority without repercussions seems like it would be satisfying for the ombud and positive for the disputants. Alcover (2009) found that use of the ombudsman process led to increased involvement by the participants with an increased "...level of participation in the processes of decision making leading to agreements and increasing their level of empowerment" (p. 283). Despite these positive results, Harrison (2007) reports a blatant under-utilization of ombudsman services on campuses and encourages universities to make students more aware of the services.

Teaching Experience

After practicing social work for thirteen years, I moved to academia. On one level, I was very excited about teaching. It is something I love to do and I enjoy seeing students grow and develop into professionals. On the other hand, I was very fearful of making a mistake that would affect social work clients all over the world. I am a woman of faith, so I prayed and prepared fervently for every class. I felt a burden to build up a capable pool of social work practitioners that would make a positive impact on the profession and the community at large. However, adjusting to academia was not easy. I was a fish out of water. There was a hierarchy and it was a man's world. I was one of very few female faculty members outside of the nursing major on campus. I also had no formal teaching experience.

When the university developed a Center for Teaching and Learning, I was the first to sign up for guidance and feedback. Prior to the development of the Center, I observed several professors known for their positive student outcomes. I sought feedback and had discussions with successful professors. I love to learn and try new things in the classroom, so I incorporated service and experiential learning opportunities into my classes and found a way to avoid presentation fatigue. I grew as my students grew and I was encouraged and rewarded.

Eventually, it was time to make this career move official. After taking my GRE in the summer, I proceeded to apply to PhD programs. Fortunately, I received acceptance to both programs to which I applied. The program I am attending is best for my situation. The PhD director was supportive and offered me an opportunity to be a teaching assistant for the undergraduate program, which comes with the benefit of a stipend and free tuition. The stipend is a blessing.

Teaching as a Teaching Assistant

Initially, I was very nervous, as I have never taught at a state university. I spent time preparing how to engage a new audience with a different demographic. The BSW Chair gave me the assignment to teach a junior level class that I had never taught in the past. I am used to teaching throughout the curriculum, so I generally develop a relationship with the students in the Introduction to Social Work class and continue that relationship throughout their four years. In this situation, I would be plopped right in the middle of their education. In addition, when the semester is over, I may never see them again. If I made a mistake, I couldn't correct it the next time I had them or if I didn't get to cover everything I wanted to, I couldn't just tack it onto the next class I taught them. I am still adjusting to this and love to hear from my past students.

The problem

In early August, a course syllabus was sent to me for the course I was assigned. The course was new and it took some components from a previous course. The BSW Chair gave me instructions to review the syllabus and make corrections and changes. Since I do this on a regular basis for the courses I teach at my full time job, I made changes (more than I should have) and proceeded with teaching the course later in the month. After the course started, the BSW Chair asked me to send the adjusted syllabus to her highlighting any changes made. I followed the directions and found out I made a major error. In my role as a teaching assistant, I did not have the authority to make the changes I made. In addition, since there was another section of the course I was teaching, it was important that the courses be nearly identical. (In the past at my full time job, if there were two sections of a course offered, the same professor generally taught them.) It was necessary to change the syllabus back to its original form. I made the changes, posted the new syllabus online (I was still navigating the online system, so I failed to post the previous one), told the students about my error taking full responsibility, and proceeded with instructing the course.

The university ombud

Since I already sent the original adjusted syllabus to the students, the BSW chair felt she needed to consult the ombud. Since I made a mess of things, there were concerns that there would be student complaints and repercussions for changing the syllabus after the start of the semester. The Academic Ombud gave the BSW Chair instructions how to proceed. However, I had no idea that I was to wait for directions on how to proceed. Thankfully, my own actions had not strayed too much from those of the ombud. Additionally, the chair was pleased that the only syllabus posted online was the current one.

With the students having two syllabi for the same course, there was a potential for a dispute. The chair wanted to avoid a complaint to the Office of the Ombudsman. In addition, in the chair's experience, it was best for the ombud to know of potential issues prior to having a complaint. Fortunately, the students were gracious and eventually became clear on which syllabus to follow. I was very thankful for the chair's intervention. It would have been very uncomfortable for me to be the cause of a grievance.

Future experience with the ombud

Will this be my last encounter with the ombud? Unfortunately, it may not be the case. I continue to make decisions and behave as if I am in the private university environment. I have to catch myself and remember that I do not have the same freedom as being at a smaller school. At the smaller university, my courses look different from one semester to the next avoiding presentation fatigue. I cover the material necessary for accreditation, but incorporate different activities and assignments. At the larger university, I have had to conform to standard assignments and timelines. The syllabus is the contract with the student and it is difficult to change deadlines for the convenience of the class when there is another section with students comparing and possibly complaining.

Current experiences

I love teaching at the large state university. I have learned so much from the PhD Director, the BSW Chair, and the students that I have the honor of teaching. There is a more diverse population at the state school than at the private school. This leads to more lively

discussions with differing points of view. However, at the end of the semester, it is very hard to say farewell, as I usually do not see the students again. How do adjuncts do this all the time?

Lessons learned

As aforementioned, I work at a private university. This university is in the process of reviewing its grievance policy. One of the sticking points has been the inclusion of an outside mediation service. Some feel that it would be in the best interest of the faculty members and university to have an outside party involved, whereas, others do not concur with this opinion. The concept of an ombudsman may be a possible compromise in resolving this issue. This fish may have learned something from being out of the water.

References

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